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INTRODUCTION

Prehistoric Tarascans, residing for centuries in the lake country of Michoacán, Mexico, asked questions about things around them. They asked why the land was sometimes flat, sometimes hilly, sometimes rich, and sometimes poor. They wanted to know why the precious waters of a spring suddenly erupted from beneath a tree on the hillside. They felt that the wonderful light-giving sun, the hurrying stream, the glittering stars, and the rustling leaves all required explanation.

Before the Spanish Conquest, the oral accounts of the *Petamuti* (high priest) explained the phenomena of nature through the great deeds of Tarascan gods and culture heroes. Knowledge of historical events was similarily preserved.

Some of these stories, to which Catholic and modern elements have been added, are still "history" to the native Tarascans living in isolated pueblos in the mountains. As with many people, it is what the Tarascans believe to be the historical truth, rather than the actual history itself, which most profoundly influences their thoughts and actions.

BACKGROUND OF THE LEGENDS

The Tarascan area has contracted since the time of the Spanish Conquest. Located approximately 250 miles northwest of Mexico City in the State of Michoacán, it centers in several geographic areas which form a fairly continuous block.

In the area around Zacapu (Fig. 1), traditional point of origin of the Tarascan dynasty, remain a few purely Tarascan villages. Bordering the Mexico City-Guadalajara highway a few miles northwest of Zacapu is a small, pleasant valley approximately a mile wide and six miles long. It is called La Cañada and in it nestle ten of the Once Pueblos of Pre-Conquest days.

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her and perform a special dance. The circle, the reverential respect, and the dance are repeated until the participants grow weary.

The Dance of the Viejitos is performed chiefly during the religious fiestas of December, especially in the town of Pátzcuaro, a short distance from the old imperial village of Tzintzuntzan (Fig. 1).

JUST AS THE BIRDS

Historical Comment

With their capital at Tzintzuntzan (Place of the Hummingbird), the vast Tarascan empire extended beyond the boundaries of the modern state of Michoacán and, next to the Aztec empire, was the largest political unit in Mexico. In spite of several accounts by early Spanish friars (Basalenque, 1886; Beaumont, 1932; Escobar, 1924; Mendieta, 1870; Rea, 1882), perhaps less is known about the origin and historical antecedents of the Tarascans than of any other major Mexican group.

Traditional Mexican hypotheses derive them from the northwest, suggesting close affinity to Nahuatl peoples. Philologically, this theory does not hold up; the Tarascan language has no family connection with other Mexican idioms and must be classified as an independent, isolated family (Mason, 1940). Recent archaeological work (Brand, 1944, Goggin, 1943, p. 57; Osborne, 1943) indicates a more southeasterly origin, possibly from the Mixteca of Oaxaca and Guerrero either down the east arm of the Balsas River valley or along the Pacific Coast and thence northward up the Balsas, Tepalcatepec, and Marqués rivers into central Michoacán (Fig. 2).

The Tarascans have never indulged in scholarly hypotheses. For them the answer to their early origins and travels unfolds in the legend of the birds. This legend supports the theory of a southern origin.

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The dream portion in the same legend reveals the nature of the Tarascan people's subsequent acceptance of the Conquest through the successful teachings of the Catholic church.

As literature, the legends are presented in language which seems remarkably artistic and urbane for the Tarascan's menial status and lack of education in modern Mexico. However, it should be remembered that from the beginning these stories had a direct religious association and the Petamuti undoubtedly demanded rather exact adherence to theoretical norms of oral literature by the neophyte who would succeed him as the bearer and guardian of folk tradition. The conditions of their annual telling at the fiesta of *Uazeata cónscuaro* to the assembled tribe encouraged the priest to develop them into emotional, oral literature. Some of this pre-Conquest tendency has continued to the present time. Also, these legends have probably become embellished with illusions and atmospheric details by skilled narrators in historic times. This author-translator chose the most sophisticated and excitingly literary rendition available where a choice presented itself.

One of the most impressive facts about these legends, even to the non-analytical person, is the presentation of a "mood" and the changes in mood as the given story progresses. The narrator seems to live and to feel the story.

For some of these legends to have been preserved so well since the Spanish Conquest may reflect, to some extent, the relative isolation of Michoacán, but it seems more likely to indicate the importance these legends have had and still have in Tarascan life. In the present Tarascan area, nearly four hundred and fifty years of acculturation have obscured many traits of native provenience. Today's economic specialization and trade patterns are apparently based upon aboriginal conditions (West, 1948, p. 57), yet they are known to have been formalized by Europeans (Beals, 1946, p. 210). Nevertheless, the character of such things as marriage, family life, and the people's attitudes toward life's values—the real educative forces affecting the thinking and personality of Tarascans—appear to be relatively unchanged.

Despite the more recent modifications in material culture and social organization, the basic values woven into the early legends

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539 of the Tarascans still provide the primary index of behavior in the
809 pueblos of the lake, La Sierra, and La Cañada. The heroes and
577 heroines pictured in this oral literature continue to serve as ideal behavioral referents, thereby providing through emulation the key to local approbation and social prestige.

539 The telling and re-telling of these legends is one way the
173 Tarascans instruct their young people in societal cooperation and
867 thereby maintain their cultural unity. Thus the Tarascan is pro-
182 vided with part of the cultural knowledge necessary to play the role expected of the individual in his native cultural setting. Even a casual visitor may notice certain attitudes of mind which date back to Conquest and pre-Conquest times, thereby providing the basis for a fundamental unity which has defied time and change.